



Buying Clinic

Whether you're looking for new kit or want to improve your existing hardware, you'll always find the very best advice at the Buying Clinic – where you never spend more than you have to

CONTACT

BUYING CLINIC

If you need buying advice on hardware and software, write to:

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NOTEBOOK SPECIFICATIONS

I NEED A LAPTOP FOR BEBOP



Q I play piano and keyboard, and I am about to start a degree course in Jazz Performance. I need a notebook PC that will enable me to use software such as Sibelius and Transcribe and make CD recordings from my Roland RD170 Piano Keyboard. I have a budget of around £1,200.

I have read about the Dell Inspiron 6000, Sony Vaio and Apple Powerbook. The Apple Powerbook is the most expensive, and people speak well of it. However, I have been put off because of the new Intel processors that will be introduced into Apple computers next year.

I guess that I will need 512MB of RAM and at least a 60GB hard disk, as well as a built-in sound card and external audio interface. I would be grateful if you could suggest a PC for me.

Alec Robinson

A When buying any PC, your first decision must be whether you want to run Microsoft Windows or Apple's Mac OS X. Lots of music production software packages, including Sibelius and Transcribe, are available for both systems, but some are not. Logic Pro, for instance, runs only on Apple computers.

If you need to run Apple-only software, you should buy a Powerbook. It's true that Apple computers will soon be switching to Intel processors, but if you need one before the start of your course, there's not much you can do about that. Don't worry, though: with so many PowerPC-based Macs in service, software makers are unlikely to abandon them for a few years to come.

If you don't need to run Apple-only software, you can choose from a variety of Windows-based computers. Remember to budget a decent sum for an external audio interface. You'll need to connect the RD170 keyboard using MIDI, so add either a USB device such as the Tascam US-122 or a PCMCIA device such as the E-MU 1616 to your shopping list. You can expect to pay around £150 for either of these.

With this money set aside, you still have £1,050 to purchase a powerful notebook computer. We agree that you need at least 512MB of RAM, and 1GB would be preferable. If you intend to record and mix music, you'll need a big hard disk. Look for an 80GB or 100GB internal disk. If you need more storage space, budget for an external hard disk that connects using USB2. A 250GB drive can cost less than £100.



▲ Tascam's US-122 can connect a keyboard to your PC using USB

Most manufacturers have notebooks that fit these requirements, so shop around carefully. Dell's Inspiron 6000 isn't particularly good value. You can buy one with a Celeron M 1.4GHz processor, 512MB of RAM and an 80GB hard disk for around £970 including VAT.

Sony's Vaio FS295VP gives you more power for a similar price. It comes with a Pentium M 1.73GHz processor, 512MB of RAM and an 80GB hard disk, and costs around £980 from www.dabs.com. Acer's TravelMate 3212WXM costs a little less but has a Pentium M 1.73GHz processor, an 80GB hard disk and 1GB of memory.

DESKTOP PC CASE

WHAT'S WRONG WITH BEIGE?

Q I am desperate to buy a desktop PC and have a price limit of £600. What has happened to all the cream-coloured PCs? Why are they all black and grey?

Eileen Fox

A The strange trends of computer case fashion are lost on us, too. Beige computer boxes seem to have been in retreat since the late 1990s, but not everyone wants a computer that looks like the monolith from 2001: A Space Odyssey. We'd quite like a PC in a nice shade of blue, or maybe purple.

The good news is that it's easy to buy a beige PC. Beige PC cases are still made and, if you order a PC to your specification, most manufacturers should give you the option of a beige box. We



spoke to Watford Electronics and PCNextDay, and both companies said they would be happy to supply their PCs in beige boxes if you request it.

As you have a budget of around £600, we'd recommend that you save £50 more and buy

▼ Beige PC cases are still available, and even those in black – such as Mesh's Matrix Eclipse Blast, right – can be ordered in beige



Mesh's £650 Matrix Eclipse Blast. This won our Best Budget Buy award last month and is a superb computer for the price. Best of all, Mesh tells us that it will happily supply this model in a beige box if you ask.



IPOD HARD DISK

CAN I FIX MY IPOD?

Q My iPod's hard disk has recently died. I've done some research online and have found that iPods use 1.8" hard disks made by Toshiba. Can I buy a replacement drive and fit it myself?

Mike Rutherford

A You can get at your iPod's hard disk by carefully sliding a screwdriver into the case, about two-thirds of the way down on the left-hand side of the unit. Unless you're confident about doing it, though, we'd recommend that you send your iPod off for repair.

If you decide to risk it, you'll find the hard disk is easy to unclip from its housing. Finding a replacement can be difficult, though. Toshiba's 1.8" hard disks are available online. You can buy a 20GB drive for £87 from www.span.com. However, there are two things to look out for. First, you need to buy a disk of the same capacity as the one you're replacing, as a 40GB disk is too thick to fit into a 20GB iPod.

Next, Apple modifies its hard disks. You can tell an Apple disk by the Apple logo printed on the top of it. If you don't use an Apple disk, your iPod won't work over FireWire, although it will work over USB. You can buy a USB cable from www.microanvika.com for £13. Alternatively, you can search eBay, where people often sell genuine iPod hard disks taken from broken iPods.



▲ Apple uses specific hard disks in its iPod, and replacing them with standard disks will stop your iPod working over FireWire

Once you've plugged in the hard disk, you'll have to get it working. Fortunately, Apple has made this very easy. Turn on your iPod and press Menu and Pause to reset it. Then press the Previous and Next Track buttons simultaneously. Your iPod will start in Disk Mode.

Just connect it to your PC and run the iPod updater, which is available for free from www.apple.com. This will format and configure your new iPod hard disk automatically. One automatic reboot later and your iPod will be ready and working.

HARD DISK INTERFACE

CAN I USE SATA II TOO?

Q I've had my PC for two years now and I am thinking of adding another hard disk. According to the manual my motherboard supports SATA.

Some of the hard disks reviewed in *Shopper* recently have caught my eye, but they use the SATA II interface. Would they be compatible with my motherboard?

Paul Farr

A In short, yes. SATA II drives are compatible with the SATA standard so they should work with your PC.

It's important to note, though, that SATA II drives run at their full speed of up to 300MB/s only when using an SATA II controller. With your motherboard, they should operate at speeds of up to 150MB/s, which is exactly the same as a standard SATA disk.

Our current favourite hard disk is Samsung's SpinPoint SP2504C, which won a Best Buy award in our recent hard disk group test (*Labs, Shopper* September 2005). It's now even better value at around £80 including VAT.

▼ As well as being fractionally faster than older PATA disks, SATA drives also use neater cables



TV STANDARDS

WHICH TV SHOULD I BUY?

Q I'm planning to upgrade my TV soon but the range of choice is confusing. Some TVs are stamped with High Definition (HD) Ready on them, while others aren't. There's also a choice between LCD and plasma screens, but which should I go for? I have a budget of around £1,000.

Chris Wells

A TVs have become very confusing over the past year, so we're not surprised you're having difficulty. First, there's the choice between plasma and LCD screens. Plasma displays make more noise because they have fans inside to cool them down. They are hotter and require more power than LCDs, so we'd opt for LCD at the moment.

When High Definition TV is launched next year, owners of compatible TVs will be able to enjoy higher-quality pictures with more detail. Make sure you choose an LCD model that can cope with it. A lot of resellers are selling off old stock that isn't HD compatible cheaply, so don't get caught out.

You can be sure of compatibility by buying a TV with HD Ready printed on it. However, some TVs are HD Ready but are not allowed to carry the logo because they don't quite meet all the requirements that the logo demands.

Look for a TV that has a resolution of at least 1,280x768 and a digital input. You can either have



▲ Acer's AT3201W is HD Ready and includes eight video inputs

a DVI-I connection, which works with a computer, or an HDMI connection, which is a new digital connection that also carries sound. You can switch between the two standards by buying a converter cable. It's also good to have D-sub and component inputs so that your screen will work with your existing analogue PC and DVD player connections.

Stick to our shopping list and you'll be able to choose a decent TV that meets all your needs. A good choice at the moment is Acer's AT3201W, which you can buy for £800 from www.dabs.com. It carries the HD Ready logo, has every single input type you could possibly wish for and a pretty good picture, too. ☑



PC Hardware Annoyances

If you send our star letter, you'll receive a prize. This month's winner gets a copy of O'Reilly's *PC Hardware Annoyances*, which will help you fix any hardware problems your PC is experiencing. If you don't want to spend the rest of your life troubleshooting, keep this book next to your PC along with the latest copy of *Computer Shopper*. You will find that all your PC woes disappear.